

Kids & Health

Jan 25th, 2003 YTV SWAT Panel sessions

On January 25th, 2003 **YTV** and **in-sync research** met with 48 kids aged 8 – 11 as part of the on-going YTV "SWAT Team" (kids advisory panel) and talked to them about health and nutrition. Here's what they had to say:

What does it mean to be "healthy"?

For kids, being healthy means you're "fit" & "thin" (girls) and "strong" & "powerful" (boys).

To be and stay healthy, kids suggest you "eat good food", "don't eat too much sugar" and exercise. For kids, being healthy is more about what you *eat* than what you *do*; for the most part, exercise only comes up with some prodding. However, kids do see a strong relationship between fat and health, specifically the heart; as one 9-year-old boy explained, *"too much fat could give you a heart attack."* Others pointed out that exercise is good because *"you get muscles and <it> takes away your fat,"* and that if you don't exercise *"you get bigger and bigger <and that's> bad for your heart."*

Other things that keep you healthy: Vitamins and minerals (both from food and in pill form); Not smoking; Not eating snacks every day; and one group of 9-year-old girls felt that cleanliness was important to health, citing brushing your teeth, taking a shower, and washing your face as key elements in a healthy regime (*"dirt is not healthy"*).

For boys, the upside of being healthy is that you can live longer, you won't get sick, and you can be a "fast runner." For girls it's more about looking and feeling "fit."

Are you interested in nutrition / health?

Both boys and girls claimed to be "somewhat" interested and all have had reasonable exposure to information about health and nutrition already, primarily from school and from mom.

Boys tend to be interested in staying healthy because they want to live longer and recognize that *"if you don't start early you could have problems later on."* Everyone agreed that nutrition is important (to *"operate your organs and your muscles and your bones,"* boy age 10), although many, the girls especially, thought that you don't actually need to worry about health until you're older (*"when you're 19" / "when you're a mother"*).

What are some foods that are "healthy"?

All the kids had a good grasp of what foods are healthy, and almost all of them were aware of the importance of the "four food groups." Some of the specific, top food mentions include:

- Veggies (carrots, tomatoes, celery, cucumbers, salad)
- Fruit (oranges, apples, bananas)
- Milk
- Chicken, fish, beef
- Cheese
- "Sometimes ice cream"

- “Sometimes pizza” (pizza & hamburgers were listed as both healthy foods and unhealthy foods)

Healthy drinks include (roughly in the order of mentions): Milk, water and juice. Although kids recognize the importance of water and milk, one girl (aged 9) mentioned “5 Alive” as a healthy drink.

A nutritious lunch for these kids would include something from the four food groups, and might consist of a tuna sandwich, salad, milk and clementines.

Although kids all recognized vegetables as healthy, few said they actually liked them; most claimed to really like fruit, however.

What are some foods that are “unhealthy”?

The most top-of-mind unhealthy foods for kids contain sugar. Top “unhealthy food” mentions include pop, candy and chocolate, or as one 9-year-old girl pointed out *“anything with sugar in it.”*

A list of unhealthy foods, roughly in order of mentions:

- Pop (cola and *“even orange pop!”* (boy, age 8))
- Candy
- Chocolate / chocolate bars
- Chips
- Hamburgers & french fries
- Pizza—which was also listed as a healthy food. What appears to be confusing them is the cheese, because *“there’s lots of fat in cheese”* and *“also they put a lot of oil on it.”*
- And several of the boy groups mentioned beer (!)

Conclusion

Overall the kids had a good understanding of health but they all think of diet first, before exercise, as important to staying healthy. And while they all had a good grasp of what foods are healthy (vegetables) and which foods are unhealthy (*“anything with sugar in it”*), the nutritional value of some foods (pizza, ice cream, hamburgers) still confuses them.

Of course kids enjoy many of the unhealthy foods but most recognize that, in theory at least, these should be enjoyed in moderation. Both boys and girls described the role of “unhealthy foods” in their lives as treats that “you earn,” with one girl describing them as *“every-other-day food.”* One 9-year old girl went as far as saying *“junk food is like smoking, you’re addicted to it!”* Luckily most of the kids claimed to like a lot of the healthy food anyway, specifically fruits and chicken.

The boys understand that weight is related to health, because being fat is bad for your heart; they recognize that exercise is a good way to get rid of fat. The girls saw a strong correlation between weight and self-esteem; as one 9-year old girl explained, *“if you’re not slim, then you’ll be depressed and then eating will be the only thing that makes you happy.”*